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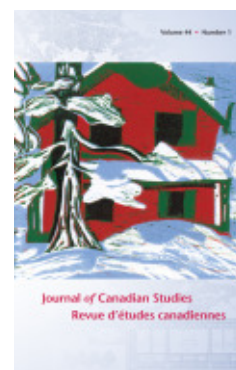
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## A Reading Spectacle for the Nation: The CBC and "Canada Reads"

Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo

CBC Radio One's "Canada Reads," which aims to select a work of Canadian literature "that all of Canada should read together," was first broadcast as a network special in 2002. This essay undertakes an ideological analysis of the cultural work that "Canada Reads" performs, focussing on the first three series and drawing upon original interviews with the show's producers, listeners, and cultural workers. The authors conceptualize the show as both a mass reading event and a media spectacle that reinforces the "blockbuster culture" of contemporary Canadian literary publishing. They also contend that the model of nation "imagined" by the content of "Canada Reads" is problematically, if predictably, conservative (bilingual and uncritically multicultural); however, the authors position this ideological limitation against the potential for creative resistance produced by the show's multiple modes of delivery.

L'émission de CBC Radio One intitulée *Canada Reads* qui choisit une œuvre littéraire canadienne « que tout le Canada devrait lire ensemble » a été diffusée pour la première fois lors d'un spécial du Réseau en 2002. Le présent article effectue une analyse idéologique des œuvres culturelles choisies pour l'émission en mettant l'accent sur les trois premières séries et en se servant d'entrevues originales avec les réalisateurs de l'émission, les auditeurs et les agents culturels. Les auteures conceptualisent l'émission comme un événement de lecture de masse et un spectacle médiatique renforçant la « culture de superproduction » de la publication littéraire canadienne contemporaine. Les auteures avancent que le modèle de nation qui est « imaginé » par le contenu de l'émission est problématiquement, mais de façon prévisible, conservateur (bilingue et aisément multiculturel). Toutefois, les auteures placent cette limite idéologique dans le contexte d'une résistance créatrice possible causée par les divers modes de délivrance de l'émission.

"CBC Radio is a great literary patron and sometimes has (quasi-) original ideas." (Richler 2002, RA4)

"Ungrateful listeners have criticized the CBC's Canada Reads campaign.... Isn't it somewhat totalitarian to urge everyone in the country to read the same book, even if the book is as good as Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*?" (Gordon 2002, A18)

"The jury's choice of an essentially unreadable novel arose partly from the ambiguity of the job. They were not to pick the best book, but the book Canada should read—an opening that gave free rein to CanCult's ingrained nannyism." (Bethune 2003, 52)

"Like many One Book pseudo-communities, the CBC also provided the requisite illusion of public participation in the form of a people's ballot ... a patronizing top-down process leads us to supposedly morally edifying books that are already quite popular." (Niedzviecki 2002, 16)

What cultural work does CBC Radio One's "Canada Reads" perform—and for whom? Does it uphold the symbolic power of the CBC and reinforce its explicit ideological imperatives as a public broadcaster to educate, inform, and represent Canadians? Or, does "Canada Reads" represent a reimagining of CBC Radio's national community and the corporation's role within the field of Canadian culture? The responses quoted above represent the complex, and often conflicting, attitudes articulated by media commentators and arts critics writing for national print publications. These writers alternately question or reinforce the CBC's cultural authority as an arbiter of literary quality, as a promoter of Canadian literature, and as a nation-building institution. Their comments underline the corporation's ideological and structural position within the ruling relations of power<sup>1</sup> and trouble the CBC's relationship to its audience, in particular to readers of literary fiction.

"Canada Reads" is an annual program that first aired in April 2002, and that aims to get Canadians across the country to read the same book: it has been described as an attempt to create a huge trans-Canadian book club.<sup>2</sup> Adapting a *Survivor*-type format, the program cashes in on the combative element so prevalent in contemporary reality television formatting by pitting books and panellists against one another. In fact, "Canada Reads" is more akin to a balloon debate in which five celebrity panellists each defend a work of Canadian literature: they then vote off one book on each subsequent program. Debates and the voting results are broadcast on CBC Radio One daily for five days, while summaries, additional features, and the radio broadcasts themselves are published on the show's website. In addition to the celebrity competition that elects "the book that Canada should read," an online "People's Choice" ballot offers listeners the chance to vote for any Canadian book they deem worthy of the honour.

Viewed by some commentators as further evidence of the "middle-brow-ing" (i.e., downgrading of quality and intellect) of the CBC (Niedzviecki 2002;

R. Smith 2004), “Canada Reads” can also be interpreted as a response to the contemporary popularity of book clubs and the concomitant increase in interest in bestselling literary fiction. Through the creation of a nation-sized reading group, the producers are acknowledging—and capitalizing upon—a contemporary trend, as well as the international literary prestige that Canadian literature has garnered since the 1990s. In this essay, we argue that “Canada Reads” creates new readers of CanLit (sales figures alone suggest this), and that, in doing so, the program becomes the latest chapter in the history of support that CBC Radio One has given to CanLit publishing; but we also demonstrate that CBC’s cultural nationalist project imbricates “Canada Reads” within twenty-first-century globalized publishing structures that favour a handful of highly commodified texts and writers. In its promotion of five books and its employment of a celebrity panel, the show is in danger of reinforcing both the “blockbuster” culture of contemporary publishing and the media-generated cult of celebrity at the expense of its public-service mandate to inform and educate its audience. We contend that the model of nation imagined by the content of “Canada Reads,” particularly in terms of text selection and the books’ explicit framing on-air, is problematically, if predictably, conservative (bilingual and uncritically multicultural); however, we position this ideological limitation against the potential for creative resistance produced by the show’s multiple modes of delivery. To this end, we suggest that the cross-platform presence of “Canada Reads” promotes a “variety pack” approach to CanLit that occasionally intrudes into the broadcasts themselves. In this way, the program structures a model of consumption within which new reading practices can occur. Finally, there is evidence that listener-readers and on-air contributors are indeed making their own use of the series in ways that reimagine and/or unsettle the national model constructed by the content of the show.

Taking our cue from Benedict Anderson’s well-known injunction that “[national] communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined,” (1991, 6) this essay concerns itself with the practices (representational and technological) through which “Canada Reads” imagines “Canada” and Canadian literary culture. As we note below, the series is very much of the moment in terms of its mode of production and dissemination, even while its project of national literacy may seem ideologically conservative and out-of-step with the global reach of digital media. The cultural geographer Don Mitchell, in his nuanced reworking of Anderson’s project, emphasizes the importance of evaluating “the *practices* and exercises of power through which [the] bonds [of community] are produced and reproduced ... the question is not what common imagination *exists*, but

what common imagination is *forged*" (2000, 269; emphasis in original). The fact that Canada's national public broadcaster attempts to forge an imagined community by reinstalling print works of fiction as the medium of national imagining underlines for us the continuing relevance of Anderson's work (with its emphasis on the rise of print capitalism) to a mass-media promotion of books and reading in the digital age. As we suggest below, technocapitalism might be the most appropriate concept through which to critique the operation and products of multimedia publishing structures, but print culture is proving to be a remarkably persistent and culturally meaningful form within the contemporary "matrix of communication" (Long 2003, 190). Understanding how different media and new technologies enable the meanings and value of reading CanLit to be reaffirmed or reconfigured helps us to comprehend that matrix better. That understanding also elucidates relationships between media representations and individual and shared identity formation. Thus, interrogating the ideological and discursive work that Canadian literature and reading are performing for the CBC and its readers through "Canada Reads" constitutes the core of our analysis.

Our essay explores the cultural work that "Canada Reads" performs by first situating the program in the context of mass reading events and investigating the program's relationship to media spectacle. Second, we analyze the CBC's nationalist project through an examination of the show's content. In the third section, we examine the program's relationship to global economic publishing structures and to the Canadian publishing industry. Finally, we critique selected reader and community responses to the show. Our interdisciplinary methodology combines qualitative interviewing of the show's producers and selected literary cultural producers and readers, with textual analysis of "Canada Reads" broadcasts and website features. This approach enables us to examine the show from a number of standpoints, and to critique both its self-representation and some of the ways that readers engage with and interpret the program.

### **Stars in Their Eyes? Canada Reads, Mass Reading Events, and Media Spectacle**

Scholars such as Heather Murray (2002) and Elizabeth McHenry (2002) have demonstrated that collective reading has a long history in North America.<sup>3</sup> The current proliferation of mass reading events within and across North America and the United Kingdom suggests that there is a new urge to form communities of understanding around printed texts—especially literary fiction. As the first project to be rolled out on a national scale, "Canada Reads" provides a rich

starting-point for the examination of a fascinating contemporary cultural phenomenon. Moreover, as a CBC project focussed on Canadian literature, "Canada Reads" begged the attention of our combined training in communication and literary studies, and coincided with our previous work on reading, writing, and publishing communities in Canada (Fuller 2002, 2004; Rehberg Sedo 2003, 2004). "Canada Reads" is an example of what we have termed, for the purposes of our research into contemporary cultures of reading, a mass reading event. We are investigating how such events configure the practices of reading and the cultural meaning of reading at local, national, and international levels through situated case studies in Canada, the US, and the UK;<sup>4</sup> but what is a mass reading event and why is "Canada Reads" so significant to our wider research agenda?

Since Oprah Winfrey launched the first series of her televised Book Club in 1996, and Nancy Pearl (Center for the Book in Washington) initiated the One Book, One Community (OBOC) reading program in Seattle, Washington, in 1998, projects that actively encourage citizens of one town, city, state, or nation to read and discuss a selected work of literary fiction have proliferated across North America. All projects are comprised of at least one literary text and events such as literary pub nights with the selected author, city tours around the theme of the book, discussion groups, or online book "clubs." More than 125 US cities and states sponsor these cultural events, while in Canada, Vancouver, Cambridge/Kitchener/Waterloo, and Ontario's First Nations hold annual OBOC programs.<sup>5</sup> One Book, One Chicago provided direct inspiration for Britain's entrance into this new cultural form via the BBC-sponsored "The Big Read," which ran from April to December 2003. While the scale and explicit aims of the events differ, as do the agencies involved, all projects deliberately use mass media to promote and enable reader participation.

"Canada Reads" is an example of a mass reading event that attempts to be a media spectacle. In this respect, it differs from other Canadian mass reading events such as One Book, One Community in Cambridge/Kitchener/Waterloo, which involve location-specific readings, book discussions, and themed activities, and which employ newsprint and the Internet chiefly to disseminate information about these events. "Canada Reads" utilizes content streaming on radio, television, and the Internet not only to maximize its audience, but also to encourage different forms of participation. In the interviews that we have conducted with producer Talin Vartanian, assistant producer Sally Han, and publicist David Barnard, the team have consistently emphasized their intention to create and recreate a *campaign*, "a cultural event" that is "fun" because its "Survivor-style" format turns reading into "a little bit of a game" (Vartanian 2003a). Given their aging audience demographic, the desire to appeal to

younger listeners by adapting a format that has been highly successful and globally popular in another medium is understandable—if not downright canny. By aligning the show with *Survivor* in press releases and on the first “Canada Reads” website, however, the producers not only found a shorthand way of explaining the show’s format but, more importantly, framed “Canada Reads” as popular culture and as a media event that would tap in to the culture of spectacle.

According to Doug Kellner, who coined the term “media spectacle,” “we are entering a new form of *technocapitalism* marked by a synthesis of capital and technology, and the information and entertainment industries, which is producing a new form of ‘infotainment society’ and spectacle culture” (2003, 17; emphasis in original). In Kellner’s account, media spectacle constructs star status for politicians and popstars alike, while an ever-increasing consumer demand for spectacle inflects the format and visual codes of all media from reality TV programs to epic Hollywood films. Depending for its success on media saturation and the capacity of consumers to become addicted to their interaction with “multimedia extravaganzas” (14), media spectacle fetishizes the visual image, thereby obscuring the labour and hierarchies of its capitalist and transnational production from the consumer. While the CBC does not have the resources to achieve media saturation and thus produce a “true” media spectacle with “Canada Reads,” the program is symptomatic of the “infotainment society” that Kellner describes. An aural medium borrows a TV-game-show-cum-reality-TV format, which has been franchised and reproduced around the world, in order to promote explicitly a nation-wide shared act of reading and learning about a “national” cultural product—Canadian Literature. Digital technology then enables radio producers to add visuals (albeit static images) to the radio broadcasts on the show’s website, before turning it back into a television program for series three and four (2004 and 2005). At first glance then, “Canada Reads” can be characterized as a clever adaptation of a global product to more local needs: an evaluation that even lends the series a resistant purpose if one recalls the contexts of technocapitalism, namely, transcontinental market expansion, the shrinking of the public sector, and the diminishing significance of the nation-state (Kellner 2003, 17-19).

If we examine the production process of “Canada Reads” more closely, however, its engagement with the culture of spectacle and celebrity threatens to obscure the producers’ nationalist project. Further, the translation of the series across media fails due to underfunding and crucial differences in communicative strategies between radio and television. “Canada Reads” attempts to construct a media event without the economic resources of a multimedia conglomerate such

as AOL Time Warner: the show has a full-time staff of 2.5 people, for example. The producers are sufficiently adept readers of media culture to have realized that some aspects of media spectacle can be imitated for relatively few dollars. “Canada Reads” on-air employs the glamour of celebrity participation; the frisson of “the playful and unexpected” produced by the “right chemistry” amongst the panelists (assisted by scrupulous prepping, scriptwriting, and editing) (Vartanian 2003a), and a cliff-hanger structure to each broadcast. To extend the event beyond the temporal and spatial limits of the broadcast schedule, “Canada Reads” offers online access to additional information through special features and links, and opportunities via website discussion boards and a “People’s Choice” poll for the listener/spectator to interact with the broadcast debate and with each other.<sup>6</sup>

So far, so canny, but staffing the national program has been a concern since its inception. In the beginning, many of those involved were volunteers within the corporation who were interested in literature—people such as Ann Jansen and Talin Vartanian. It was only in the third version of the show (2004) that Vartanian’s interdisciplinary team, equipment, funding, and office space were deemed to be a permanent rather than a temporary fixture by senior CBC management. When Vartanian was first given the go-ahead in 2001, her team had to work fast. They had to decide how to choose the book and how to create the campaign around the book. They also had to work with the publishers to ensure that enough copies could be printed and made available. Potential book titles and panel members were identified by CBC insiders and the panellists were interviewed by Vartanian, who said she looked for balance in cultural authority, and regional, gender, and ethnic representation (2003b). In the end, comedienne Mary Walsh hosted the 2002 production. Choosing a celebrity with a national profile that has been realized in several media (on stage, radio, and television) contributed to the construction of a “media event” that needed to be translated across space and formats.

The 2002 panel members were given five titles from which to choose one book: former prime minister Kim Campbell chose *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood (1985), a novel that is a commentary on repressive systems that affect women’s lives, and which some might find a surprising choice given Campbell’s feminist and policy track record; musician, Steven Page, who is well read and who seemed to represent the younger, “hipper” generations and, some might say, Torontonians, chose Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion* (1988); the actor Megan Follows chose the disturbing and complex novel *A Fine Balance*, by Rohinton Mistry (1995); writer Leon Rooke chose Margaret Laurence’s Canadian classic *The Stone Angel* (1964); and writer Nalo Hopkinson chose a book of poetry, *Whylah Falls*, by the celebrated Nova Scotian writer



George Elliott Clarke (1990). In keeping with the production of spectacle, the winner of the first series, *In the Skin of a Lion*, was announced at the National Arts Centre by Roch Carrier, the National Librarian, and the book's on-air champion, Steven Page, was interviewed live from New York City. In other words, a bestselling book by one of Canada's most famous writers was lauded by a rock musician standing on a concert stage at the very centre of metropolitan culture. By opting for a "spectacle" effect here, the producers spotlighted the cultural authority accorded to those achieving international fame (both the singer and the creative writer), rather than the "national" cultural significance that *In the Skin of a Lion* might have in terms of its intratextual troubling of "national" historical narratives, for example. Such a spectacular climax certainly guaranteed good print-media coverage for "Canada Reads" at home; however, its presentation style and content tied the show ever more firmly into the structures of contemporary media spectacle and its dependence on a commodity capitalism sustained by global economic structures and media trends that operate transnationally (Couldry 2003; Kellner 2003; Turner 2004).

An attempt to increase the scale of the media spectacle by broadcasting "Canada Reads" in an additional medium was first made, unsuccessfully in our opinion, in 2004. For this third season of "Canada Reads," the five daily 23-minute segments of book discussion were also broadcast on CBC Newsworld twice a day. In parallel with the radio broadcasts, the TV shows aired once during the daytime, and then as part of the late-night national news. The simulcast led to some disjunctive moments of visual description made by the host, Bill Richardson, for the benefit of radio listeners, that focussed chiefly on what the panellists were wearing. These comments played well with Richardson's queer radio persona, while also foregrounding the mechanics of producing a "staged" media event that requires glamour and costume, the drama of clashing personalities, and a high-density cross-media presence in order to compete with the "spectacles" constructed around politicians, sports celebrities, and pop stars from Bush to Beckham. Despite the black background set lending the TV version the ambience of a game show, the broadcasts were not particularly successful as television shows because the drama of "Canada Reads" is conveyed chiefly through debate, while the context for the chosen titles is provided by panellists' verbal presentations and audio clips of the selected authors making comments on their craft. These are typical of the communicative strategies that radio, a medium dependent on auditory signs, employs in order to establish a context for the broadcast content. In this way, radio mediates "the risks of ambiguity or complete communication failure [which] are high" (Crisell 1994, 5). By

varying the verbal text through changes of speaker and pace, and signposting the structure of the show (in announcements such as “previously on ‘Canada Reads...’” and repeated explanations of the debate format by Bill Richardson), the radio version of “Canada Reads” attempts to engage and retain both the attention and the imagination of its listeners. Since radio listeners may be highly mobile and busily occupied within a variety of domestic, work, or leisure spaces while they listen, radio constantly has to guard against the fact that it can readily become “like wallpaper” within everyday life (Laycock 1992, 1). Although television is also “part of a larger environment with which we remain connected even while we watch” (Allen 1992, 13), the TV viewer is more likely to remain in one space than a radio listener—not least because TV employs visual as well as auditory and textual codes to convey meaning. On television, visual cues within the *mise-en-scène* are all that is required to establish context: a “Canada Reads” banner in the background of the set; projections of images of book covers and their authors onto screens behind the panellists; a shelf holding the books that have been voted off; a semicircle of chairs for the celebrity guests. The phatic function of phrases that hail the radio audience—“You’re listening to round three of “Canada Reads”—are redundant, and can literally be a turn-off to a television viewer. Thus, “Canada Reads,” when translated directly from radio to television, fails largely because of the different modes of communication employed by the two media. TV producers were not able to exploit the visual techniques (moving images, camera-angles, range of shots) or editing strategies that make book television engaging for viewers.

Oprah’s Book Club, by contrast, employs a range of televisual communicative strategies that convey information, establish context, and, crucially for her purposes, build intimacy with the viewing audience (Chabot Davis 2004, 401; Striphas 2003, 296). Her show, mediated via her celebrity personality and framed by her narrative authority, regularly uses pre-recorded on-location film, intercut with talking heads (some “live,” others pre-recorded) and interactive studio discussion incorporating many reaction shots. The television version of “Canada Reads” does not grab viewer attention in these ways and thus it is not sufficiently dramatic and spectacular to attract new audiences. If the show’s success at constructing a media spectacle has been a mixed affair, however, then its employment of the Internet and its attempts to engage readers in books in a variety of ways should be applauded. As we demonstrate below, the cross-media delivery of the show between radio and Internet performs significant ideological work in terms of the different reading practices that it promotes and enables.

## Mediated Encounters: Variety Packs of Reading

We have already suggested various ways in which “Canada Reads” can be understood as a product of our “infotainment society,” as a media event or spectacle (Kellner 2003, 11). We believe that this is particularly evident in two realms: first, the program offers a synthesis of entertainment and information that has become a trend thanks to the convergence of visual, print, and digital media, which enables “cross-media and cross-platform content and promotion” (Turner 2004, 9). The website for the program, for instance, expanded during the first three years of the contest to incorporate more information about authors’ lives, related recommended reading, and interactive sound and word features providing a short history of Quebec writing (year two) or maps tracing the journey of *The Last Crossing* (year three). Of course the cross-media delivery and infotainment content of “Canada Reads” is a tried-and-tested formula and has much in common with the dynamics and features offered on the website for Oprah’s Book Club, for instance (Oprah’s Book Club 2005). In theory, the blend of entertainment and information offered by the CBC’s program should, therefore, appeal to members of existing book groups, many of whom value the opportunity to “discuss and think” (Hartley 2001, 36) and the space “to learn comfortably and informally” (Rehberg Sedo 2004, 228) that collective reading in face-to-face environments provides. To some extent then, “Canada Reads” draws upon the experience of book groups and reflects what publishers and scholars have determined about book groups, namely that their members are attracted by the notion of authors as celebrities and enjoy researching author biographies and contextual information (Rehberg Sedo 2004).

The second way that “Canada Reads” can be understood as a product of our “infotainment society” is in its mode of delivery for the reading of literary fiction. This is structured both ontologically and epistemologically by contemporary media culture and the political economy of the media and cultural industries. To adapt a phrase from McGinley and Conley’s study of publishers’ reading guides, “Canada Reads” delivers reading to its audience in “variety packs” (2001, 209). These “variety packs” have the potential to offer different reading practices and a range of literate identities to readers through the presentation of various types of encounters with a particular book.<sup>7</sup> Publishers’ reading guides achieve this through suggested questions and themes for discussion, short author biographies, plot summaries, and, sometimes, information about pertinent social and historical contexts, whereas “Canada Reads” employs multiple media. Within each medium’s presentation of the books, there are further opportunities to frame a variety of readings, most notably in the radio broadcasts where different

interpretations are actively solicited from discussants. The mixture of panellists such as popular musicians, politicians, writers, opera divas, and filmmakers, who have different educational backgrounds and investments in CanLit, provokes implicit and, in year three, explicit questions around how people read, respond to, and evaluate fiction, both in the broadcast shows and on the website discussion boards. The show's format drives these epistemological explorations into the ways that readers (at least the panellists present) make literary fiction mean not only through the *Survivor* model that requires that the "value" of a book be articulated and justified, but also through the directorial decisions and editorial process that foregrounds personality clashes and differences of opinion. Thus in 2004, Measha Brueggergosman's passionate advocacy of reading as an emotionally engaged and engaging encounter was pitted against Szuzsi Gartner's more formalist emphasis on stylistics and well-crafted narrative as essential to a novel's success. These are epistemological "clashes" as well as hermeneutic (and personality) ones because they depend on different models of knowing—one of which incorporates emotion and experiential knowledge, and one founded on a familiarity with canonical aesthetics. Since these differences made for dramatic divergences of opinion, they survived the editing process. Ideologically speaking, these moments of on-air drama not only shore up the "spectacle," but they also have a more radical effect: they make reading CanLit matter for readers both emotionally and politically. To "consume" CanLit becomes, if only for the brief moment of the on-air drama, not only an act of learning about Canadian culture, but also an emotionally engaged act of questioning that culture, one's knowledge about it, and one's connection to it.

Other components of the program's "variety pack" include dramatized versions of the five books (which are broadcast on CBC radio) and publishers' reading guides. The reading guides, most originally prepared by publishers for use by book groups and accessible via the "Canada Reads" website in year three, highlight the interplay between public service and for-profit organizations that is an increasingly common feature of a highly convergent media society. With the opportunity to purchase always just a few mouse-clicks away, the reader/browser's role as a consumer is made starkly apparent. The fact that the majority of "Canada Reads" selections are published by multinational companies such as Random House signals the location of literary fiction reading within the global structures of capital. "Canada Reads" may be understood as a nationalist project at a discursive and symbolic level, but in terms of its political economy it is as bound to the structures of global commerce as it is to the exacting demands of the public purse and cultural policy. Without the co-operation of the publishers, who need up to three months' lead time to print additional copies of the

book, and retailers, who must keep the selected titles secretly stored in back rooms until the allotted hour of revelation, “Canada Reads” could not occur.

The variety-pack model is a potentially positive aspect of the program’s engagement with multiple media because it presents various types of encounters with the selected books. While the interpretative frameworks on offer via the variety packs may seem limited to liberal humanist models of understanding, books are represented as robust and flexible texts that can be encountered and re-encountered through different media, through private, individual reflection, and through various types of collective, public, and mediated engagement. This presents the reading of CanLit as an activity that belongs to a contemporary, dynamic multimedia environment, and, in doing so, the program, in common with other mass reading events in North America, helps to reconfigure the role of the printed book in the electronic era. Reading and offering opinions about CanLit becomes a shared activity that can take place in cyberspace, on-air, and within the public sphere. It is represented as an activity that is not confined to students, professors, writers, and professional broadcasters, nor to class rooms, author readings, and the academy. The variety-pack model of consumption promotes democratic access to reading in a way that accords with the CBC’s public service ideology (made explicit online in the series’ affiliation with the Canadian National Institute for the Blind, for example). More profoundly, the variety-pack approach frames the reading of CanLit as an act that stimulates pleasure, emotion, knowledge acquisition, and self-reflection—effects that may be ideologically unsettling for the reader, and, therefore ultimately, for the way that Canada is imagined by readers. Even when the portability of shared reading across media fails (as it did with the television version of the series), “Canada Reads” succeeds in its representation of Canadian writing as a medium that invites and stimulates public debate about social and political issues. As we demonstrate below, however, the program’s ability to sustain those debates is compromised not only by the producers’ desire to make book programming into an entertaining “spectacle” or “game,” but also by the limitations of the CBC’s model of national imagining.

### **“Canada” Reads? Imagining a National Reading Community**

What kind of nation does “Canada Reads” imagine? Who is interpellated by the program as the “Canada” that “Reads,” and how does the CBC’s national project relate to the production and promotion of a Canadian literature? As noted above, mass reading events foreground the location of the printed book, more specifically literary fiction, within a contemporary “matrix of communication”

(Long 2003, 190), which is supported by a complex combination of multinational corporations, publicly funded organizations, independent capital, and individual consumers. As a public broadcaster financed by the federal government, the CBC Radio's situation in the "matrix of communication" is heavily inflected by its economic dependence on public money and the CBC's Parliamentary mandate. The authors of the *Canadian Broadcasting Act*, which established the CBC, may or may not have imagined a political community as we have come to define it based on the work of Benedict Anderson (1991), but the relatively recent House of Commons Standing Committee on Communications and Culture's report on the linkages of cultural and media institutions to cultural identity and political unity imply acceptance of this notion (Standing Committee 1991). For Anderson, popular cultural forms such as newspapers enable the nation to be "imagined ... in the minds of each [member]" as an "image of communion" and shared beliefs, a community that, regardless of actual inequalities, is always "conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (1991, 6-7). A press release for "Canada Reads" produced in 2003 clearly evoked this model of imagined community. In an explicit articulation of the nation-forging role of radio, the producers cite the CBC's long-standing mandate to "[develop] radio programming that enlightens, reflects and connects Canadians." In a digital era of corporate and technological convergence, not to mention successive government funding cuts, such a project could be viewed as over-ambitious. Nevertheless, and partly due to the high standard of its news and investigative journalism, intelligent film, and radio documentaries, the CBC has accrued tremendous cultural capital and authority. Independent polls indicate that it is "seen by Canadians as the mass media most responsible for taking a leading role in building strong Canadian identity; more so than, in descending order, newspapers, book publishers, and private broadcasters" (Pike 1995, 35). Book programming on CBC Radio has played an active part in this process of national identity formation through its promotion—and publication—of Canadian writing.

CBC radio has a long history of book programming, but program format and coverage of Canadian writing have changed considerably during the last 60 years, partly because of developments in electronic media, and partly due to financial cutbacks and restructuring at the CBC during the 1990s (Canadian News Facts 2000; *The Globe and Mail* 2003). In the 1950s and 1960s, producer Robert Weaver championed contemporary Canadian writers such as Alice Munro and Mordecai Richler in programs like *Canadian Short Stories*, *CBC Wednesday Night*, *Critically Speaking*, and *Anthology* (McCaig 2002, 25-30). New Canadian writing was introduced to a nationwide audience at a time when mass-market paperback publishing was in its infancy and Canadian literature rarely featured on

high school or university curricula. Roy MacSkimming suggests that, “compensating for the shortage of both publishers and booksellers, CBC Radio enacted an early form of audio publishing” by featuring short stories, plays, poetry, and criticism (2003, 39). In other words, the CBC helped to create a nationwide audience for Canadian writing during a crucial period of its development; but how might we characterize the broadcaster’s relationship to CanLit in the digital era? Various publishers, writers, and commentators note the “shrinking media coverage of books and authors” (MacSkimming 2003, 390), the featuring of “fewer books and only big books” particularly in print media (Baird 2003), and bemoan “Canada Reads’s” “reducing the whole rainbow of Canadian Literature to Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion*” (Van Herk 2003, 140). Post-*Morningside*, with its regular author interviews and round-table discussions about Canadian books, the CBC Radio’s national network offers listeners *Between the Covers* (a CBC Radio One program: the majority of recordings are of Canadian books, but many are already bestsellers and/or award-winners before they are broadcast); *Writers and Company* (a CBC Radio One show with very few Canadian authors featured); *Talking Books* (a CBC Radio One weekly book club that discusses some Canadian titles); and occasional book slots on programs covering the arts (e.g., *The Arts Tonight*; *Big City, Small World*). “Book chat” at “the traditionally book friendly CBC” (MacSkimming 2003, 390) is less focussed on new and emerging writers, interviews with Canadian authors, and the dramatization of previously unpublished work, and more concerned with responding to the already popular. This shift away from nurturing new literary talent and towards support for the “blockbuster culture” has caused some resentment amongst cultural workers. As one small-press publisher of Canadian writing said of “Canada Reads”: “[The CBC] have so much power and they don’t know it. These are not the only five interesting Can Lit books. We can all read the f\*\*\*\*\* best-seller list!” (Gugeler 2003). How CBC radio uses its cultural authority in relation to Canadian culture is clearly an emotive topic for literate listeners working in the media and cultural industries. These cultural workers wish to see the corporation using its cultural capital to promote a wider range of texts, and thus to support the economically vulnerable small presses, many of which remain committed to developmental work with individual writers and communities.

What does this history and the future of “book talk” look like down on Toronto’s Front Street? Talin Vartanian, radio producer and one of the instigators of “Canada Reads,” posits the project outside the CBC tradition of “programmes that deal with books in a serious fashion” (2003a). The initial project was conceived by Sarah Jane Wilson, Peter Kavanagh, and Vartanian, who

claims she was not chosen for her knowledge of CanLit, but because she had 26 years of experience in programming (2003b). Nevertheless, some of the original objectives idealistically outlined in the proposal for "Canada Reads" are clearly inflected not only by the CBC's mandate as a public broadcaster to "enlighten, reflect and connect Canadians," but also by its history as a supporter of Canadian writing and cultural industries:

- To increase the number of readers across Canada;
- To celebrate Canadian writing;
- To reflect Canadians to themselves through literature;
- To forge a bond between younger and older readers;
- To unify the country;
- To support the literacy movement;
- To heighten the profile of the country's libraries and other literary centres;
- To provide an escape from the realities of everyday life;
- To help publishers of Canadian books (Kavanagh and Vartanian 2001).

The document stated that, "All of the above are worthy, noble objectives; however in conceiving this project, we focused on one goal which we view as primary: To create excitement across the country about reading, by inviting Canadians to read one book together." "Excitement," "reading," and the notion of offering their audience a collective reading experience were, therefore, foregrounded by the producers. Once again, Anderson's imagined community appears to spring to life to an uncanny degree here, as participation in popular processes (listening to the radio and reading a book in common) are posited as acts that will "forge a bond" and unify people across space and social difference. The producers' primary goal is also commensurate with the production of a media spectacle that requires drama and "excitement" if it is to capture the consumer's attention and imagination. What this interesting marriage of nationalism with media spectacle produces is an ideological tension. The nation imagined in this document is one with definite territorial boundaries and economic limits (implied through the references to institutional networks such as "the country's libraries," and the repetition of the descriptor "Canadian" in the list of objectives). The communicative media and style that the series employs, however, is produced and supported by flows of technology and capital that continually breach those "national" limits. Such a tension might produce an ideologically productive outcome for a listener-reader who chooses to discuss the books on the show's discussion board, thus negotiating textual meaning with a mixed group of readers located both within and outside



national borders. What is compromised, however, is the CBC's social agency as a supporter of local (that is, national) cultural industries.

Other practical and structural factors limit the "help" that can be given to Canadian publishers and "libraries and other literary centres." Obstacles include the lack of a permanent outreach unit at the CBC dedicated to fostering partnerships with other agencies such as educational and literacy organizations. The subsequent reliance on the small, temporary "Canada Reads" team to communicate with teachers and librarians, in addition to their other work on the program, curtails the show's potential as a resource for, and the subject of, creative partnerships. Developing projects with such agencies could reconfigure *what* is celebrated about Canadian writing. It might also open up CBC airtime to a wider range of Canadian readers— young and old—who have their own ideas about whether or not literature "reflect(s) Canadians to themselves." Realizing this aspect of "Canada Reads," however, would require substantial funding and a clear vision of the CBC as an agency that contributes, not just to the maintenance, but also to the enlargement, of a democratic public sphere. This would inculcate a model of the arts as community-centred in an era when successive federal governments back public-private partnerships and "arts for profit" (Fuller 2004, 43-45, 248-49; Godard 2000, 223).

The social milieu in which "Canada Reads" was proposed is also noteworthy. A little more than one month after 11 September 2001, Vartanian wrote of her initial discussions with librarians, CBC colleagues, and writer (and former National Librarian) Roch Carrier that "Many had instant and strong opinions about which book should be chosen and why. Some sent unsolicited ideas about how this project might unfold on the radio. Others simply loved the thought that we might all have a chance to take our minds off the turmoil the world has faced since September 11th and think about something far more pleasant: like the joy of reading" (Kavanagh and Vartanian 2001). Thus the ideal of "Canada Reads" providing an "escape from the realities of everyday life" could be interpreted as a deliberate, if understandable, turn away from the political arena and pressing contemporary issues. Reading is posited here as a pleasure-seeking and pleasure-fulfilling activity, rather than as a means of engaging or re-engaging with an increasingly unsettling world. Within many face-to-face book groups, readers do not understand these goals as mutually exclusive (Hartley 2001; Long 2003; Rehberg Sedo 2004), so it is interesting—some might say alarming—that producers working for a public broadcaster should privilege "excitement about reading" and the unity that collective reading might bring above political debate and ideas.

If the emphasis on “book chat” at the CBC has, as the producers’ own objectives and our commentary suggest, shifted from interviewing writers to “celebrating” iconic examples of their work, from acting as an audio-publisher to presenting books as escapist “fun,” then who is the intended audience for “Canada Reads”? During our interviews, the producers made no bones about the necessity of attracting new and younger listeners to CBC Radio One through the creation of, in their words, “a national cultural event” (Vartanian 2003b). We noticed that, when pressed on the question “who is Canada Reads for?” senior producer Talin Vartanian and publicist David Barnard imagine a diverse—if not utopic—range of participants, from “avid readers in the 35/40+ group,” to “regular listeners who want to come back to reading,” to high-school students who might be accessed through outreach work to high schools (for which the team is understaffed) (Vartanian 2003a). Uncertainty about the exact parameters of the target demographic perhaps reflects an anxiety to be all-appealing during a period of upheaval, which, during recent history, has included funding cuts and a shake-up of staffing and programming that proved unpopular with listeners and received a bad press (Carlin 2003; *The Globe and Mail* 2003; R. Smith; Taras 1997, 2001).

If “Canada Reads” is a “national cultural event” (Vartanian 2003a), then the nation it imagines in terms of its content foregrounds the bilingual conception of the Canadian nation-state with anglophone Canadians clearly the primary audience. The Canada imagined is also heavily dependent on cultural stereotypes about Canadian culture and society. As Laura Moss has argued, between 2002 and 2004, the show’s winning titles “reinforce[d] certain popular notions of Canadianness,” such as a depoliticized notion of multiculturalism, “the tension of Quebec in Canada,” and the “epic” nature of Western history (2004, 7). In 2005, *Rockbound*, neither a canonical novel nor a “blockbuster,” romped to victory on a wave of nostalgia and idealism about regional cultures whipped up by the celebrity panellists. If “Canada Reads” continues to promote rather simplistic and popular images of the nation, then the production team was anxious to persuade us that they quickly became aware of their linguistic gaff. In response to criticism of the first series, which featured only anglophone writers and panellists, subsequent years (2003-2005) always included one Québécois panellist and one French-Canadian book (presented in an English translation). Not all of the 15 books selected between 2002 and 2004 were available in translation to francophone readers, however, should they wish to be part of the Canada that reads with CBC Radio One when the programs were broadcast. Amongst the titles that had not been translated into French—let alone published in Quebec—was Thomas King’s *Green Grass*,

*Running Water* (1993) and, while Alice Munro may be widely read by and taught to anglophone readers, her work is not well known by francophones.<sup>8</sup> Parallel publishing structures, international rights sales, the economic power of larger, French publishers such as Gallimard, and low rates of pay for Canadian translators are just some of the factors that sustain the “two [linguistic] solitudes” of Canadian writing in the twenty-first century. Clearly, the team that produced “Canada Reads” cannot be expected to solve such a cultural divide and its literary infrastructure with one series; however, “Canada Reads” is fascinating to cultural critics precisely for the fissures it reveals in the ideology and operation of “national” institutions such as the CBC. In “Canada Reads 2003,” for example, Denise Bombardier’s choice *Prochain Episode/Next Episode*, by Hubert Aquin (1965)—a stylistically and philosophically demanding modernist novel narrated by a suicidal terrorist—became a controversial winner thanks to a last-minute change-of-heart vote by Justin Trudeau, the son of that avid federalist and proponent of official bilingualism, Pierre. In what could be interpreted as an attempt to bridge the language divide of CanLit, CBC aired a series of readings of five (post-1945) Québécois authors on *Richardson’s Roundup*<sup>9</sup> and *Between the Covers* in a program called “Writing Quebec.” A web feature provided an online version of this lesson in literary history. These efforts to revise “[English-] Canada Reads” as a program that at least signalled the existence of bilingualism and francophone culture were augmented by the broadcasting of Société Radio-Canada’s “Le Combat des livres” (29 March–2 April 2004) (“Le Combat des livres” 2005). “Le Combat” employed the same elimination format with five celebrities defending five books published by Quebec-based presses. Two books had previously seen battle on CBC Radio One—Martel’s *Life of Pi* (2001, 2003) and Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985, 1987)—which suggests that it is the “blockbusters,” propelled by economic and symbolic power, that cross the linguistic divide. The winner was a novel set in Africa, Gil Courtemanche’s *Un Dimanche à la piscine à Kigali* (2000). At the level of text selection, then, “Le Combat” imagined a Canada spilling beyond the borders not only of Quebec, but also across the forty-ninth parallel, and even transcontinentally. Readers contributing to the discussion boards for the French-language program were generally situated within Quebec, however, with a minority of contributors located outside the province in, for example, Ottawa, Vancouver, and Chicago.

While the existence of “Le Combat” suggests that the trend for shared reading and the interest in award-winning Canadian literary fiction is by no means exclusive to anglophone listeners, this example of “mirror” programming reinforces that old-fashioned and unhelpful bilingual, “two solitudes” model of Canadian culture—at least in structural terms. Readers using the discussion

boards for "Le Combat" thoroughly embraced all the titles selected, however, initiating discussions that not only took account of Quebec and Canada's polyphonic communities, but also situated the texts within contemporary world politics. One example of this was the intelligent interest in Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale/La Servante Écarlate*, which several posters related to the war in Iraq, and discussed in the context of women's issues in Canada and the Middle East.<sup>10</sup> The Canada imagined by listener-readers of "Canada Reads" and "Le Combat" does not, therefore, necessarily reproduce the ideological and structural models of the programs. If finance and the existing CBC infrastructure place limits on the way that the "Canada Reads" community can be imagined and realized by its producers, then technological convergence and the program's take-up of contemporary media cultural trends enables a different model of "nation" to be represented. To what extent, then, does the employment of multiple media create a space for listener-readers to contest dominant ideologies of, for example, "race," nation, and gender?

If the content of "Canada Reads" is examined, then the "national" community being hailed appears to consist largely of white, literate individuals with a university education. The majority of the 15 books featured between 2002-2004, for instance, were written by Canadians who fit that description, as did most of the panellists. During that period, there were two Afro-Canadian, but no First Nations or Southeast-Asian Canadian panellists, despite the fact that *In the Skin of a Lion* (written by a Canadian born in Sri Lanka) won the first competition; reader-listeners elected Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (set in India, the author's birthplace) as their "People's Choice" for 2002, and both King's novel (which draws in form and content upon the author's Aboriginal heritage) and Clarke's poetry (clearly inflected by the writer's intimate knowledge of Afro-Nova Scotian culture and history) were runners-up in the on-air competitions (2002 and 2003 respectively). In other words, books that explicitly draw on and are shaped by histories, narrative traditions, and worldviews of Canadians who have multiple "national" affiliations or who articulate the experiences of diasporic or colonized communities are of great interest to both panellists and off-air readers. Of course, the appeal of these books to readers sometimes lies in their portrayal of "exotic" locations or unfamiliar cultural practices. Or, as the presentation of *In the Skin of a Lion* demonstrated, the potentially unsettling questions about race, language, and power that a book raises can be ignored in favour of readings that confirm a normative vision of Canadian society as unproblematically multicultural. Responding to the success of Ondaatje's novel, for example, its "Canada Reads" champion Steven Page, albeit prompted by Roch Carrier's comments that Ondaatje "writes beautifully about things at night or in the fog,"

emphasized its aesthetics (“this book is very close to music”) and its accessibility (“a breezy read,” and “it transcends being about Toronto”) (CBC “Winner”). As the on-air and website debates about King’s novel discussed below demonstrate, however, “Canada Reads” can open up spaces that generate interpretations of books that articulate ideologically disruptive questions about writing, nation, and society.

Some listener-readers are happy with the version of CanLit offered by “Canada Reads”: a package consisting of a high proportion of canonical texts and bestsellers that reinforces the CBC’s position as a conservative cultural authority. Describing themselves as “members of the blue rinse set” and “of senior status,” the Sloanes and a dozen friends from Picton, a small-town on the north shore of Lake Ontario, hold “Canada Reads” dinners during which the books are discussed. Evelyn wrote, “I find the books selected are fascinating. They show a true mix of what we are as Canadians.... It is interesting that the books chosen are not necessarily about or set in Canada or indeed written by people born or raised in Canada.” “Canada Reads” appears to confirm the Sloanes’ white, liberal humanist view of their nation-state: a position that was challenged on-air in “Canada Reads” 2004 by two panellists—an Afro-Canadian Maritimer and Winnipeg’s gay mayor. It is significant that both panellists are associated with regions that are in economic and cultural terms “marginal” to the Toronto-centric Canadian “national media.” Both African-Canadian Measha Brueggergosman from New Brunswick and Glen Murray, a white anglophone who grew up in Montreal and who, when the show aired, was the first openly gay mayor of a large Canadian city, spoke passionately in favour of Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993). Murray foregrounded King’s use of oral storytelling structures and his satirical presentation of Christian and Eurocentric values, while Brueggergosman appreciated the work she had to do as a non-Native reader: “He makes you figure things out for yourself,” she insisted. When King’s novel was voted out in favour of 2004’s winner, Guy Vanderhaeghe’s historical epic *The Last Crossing* (2002), she declared: “how very Canadian—we don’t want anything that challenges us.” The on-air clashes over the literary merit and political value of King’s work revealed a range of anxieties: about the ideological function of fiction; about the position of First Nations communities within the Canadian polity; and the reluctance of most panellists to confront issues of “race” head-on. The discussion on the website echoed but also interrogated these anxieties, with participants advocating the importance of “listening” to King’s delineation of colonization, racism, and resistance. Similar to Rehberg Sedo’s findings of face-to-face book club discussion (2004), these responses suggest that “Canada Reads” is capable of opening up spaces where dominant ideologies and social

formations can be contested—even if the format of the carefully edited on-air shows ultimately contains dissent.

### The Ties That Bind: Global Structures and Local Anxieties

As we have noted above and in our introduction, the media event that is “Canada Reads” is a knotty tangle of (conservative) nationalist ideology, transnational capital, and global media structures. How does this matrix of material and ideological factors determine the notion of literary value and version of CanLit that “Canada Reads” promotes? What kind of cultural work does the program perform for the Canadian publishing industry? A closer look at the 15 books featured between 2002 and 2004 is instructive:

#### 2002:

- Margaret Atwood. 1985. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart.  
Margaret Laurence. 1964. *The Stone Angel*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart; NCL 1988.  
Michael Ondaatje. 1988. *In the Skin of a Lion*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart; Random House of Canada, 1988.  
George Elliott Clarke. 1990. *Whylah Falls*. Vancouver: Polestar.  
Rohinton Mistry. 1995. *A Fine Balance*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart.

#### 2003:

- Paul Hiebert. 1947. *Sarah Binks*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart; NCL 1995.  
Yann Martel. 2001. *Life of Pi*. Toronto: Knopf/Vintage Canada.  
Helen Humphreys. 2003. *The Lost Garden*. Toronto: HarperCollins Canada.  
Wayne Johnston. 1998. *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*. Toronto: Knopf/Vintage Canada.  
Hubert Aquin. 1965. *Next Episode*. Trans. Sheila Fischman. McClelland & Stewart; NCL 2001.

#### 2004:

- Thomas King. 1993. *Green Grass, Running Water*. Toronto: HarperCollins Canada.  
Guy Vanderhaeghe. 2002. *The Last Crossing*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart.  
Mordecai Richler. 1998. *Barney's Version*. Toronto: Vintage Canada.  
Monique Proulx. 2003. *The Heart is an Involuntary Muscle*. Trans. Fred A. Reed and David Homel. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre.  
Alice Munro. 1998. *The Love of a Good Woman*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart/Penguin Canada.

First, the program has starred the fiction of several *internationally* renowned (anglophone) exponents of CanLit such as Alice Munro, Michael Ondaatje, Margaret Atwood, and Mordecai Richler. These are writers with substantial name-recognition. Second, at least nine titles were bestsellers in Canada before they were selected for “Canada Reads.” Third, at least half of the books can be described as canonical, since they are widely taught within the academy and feature regularly on “great Canadian books” lists. Thus, most of the books had already proven popular with Canadian readers, and many had received literary accolades and/or academic critical attention. They could not really be described as work by “new,” “unknown,” or “obscure” writers since none of them is the first published work of its author. Even *Whylah Falls*, perhaps best described as a long poem and therefore not necessarily known to well-informed fans of Canadian fiction, had remained in print since its original publication, its sales buoyed by its slot on university curricula and the increasing success of the prolific Clarke, who was awarded the Governor General’s Award for Poetry in 2001. Finally, only two titles are published by presses that are wholly Canadian-owned: Clarke’s *Whylah Falls* and the English translation of Proulx’s novel. The majority of the selected books are published in Canada by “branch plant” publishers such as HarperCollins and Random House of Canada—even McClelland & Stewart “the Canadian” publisher is partly-owned by Bertelsmann AG. The majority of the fifteen books, therefore, had already accrued substantial symbolic and financial capital before their starring role on “Canada Reads”—capital that circulates globally through multinational media corporations.

Symbolic capital also accrues and circulates transnationally via literary awards, such as the Man Booker Prize, the IMPAC award, and the Commonwealth Writers Prize, that bring media attention to Canadian nominees in the English-speaking world. Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi* (2001) reveals the international trajectory of symbolic and economic capital particularly well. As Aritha Van Herk notes, Martel’s novel had the misfortune to be published in Canada and the United States on 12 September 2001 and was thus largely ignored by the media until he won the Man Booker prize in 2002 (2003, 136). Published in North America by Knopf (Random House of Canada) and Harcourt (part of Reed Elsevier Plc), the book’s United Kingdom rights were sold to Canongate, a Scottish independent publishing house that, post-Booker, turned a healthy profit on the novel. Media power, in Nick Couldry’s definition “the particular concentration of symbolic power in media institutions” (2003, 13), made Martel into a literary celebrity through extensive exposure of author, book, and alleged plagiarism scandal in newspapers, on television, and the Internet. Both the media’s symbolic power and the symbolic capital that Martel accrued through literary

prizes and public appearances occur within (and are made possible by) the wider landscape of technocapitalism with its transnational economic structures and global flows of information. It is beyond the scope of this essay to trace in full the intricate relationships between an international bestselling novel such as *Life of Pi*, its commercial success, the author's celebrity, and the ways in which communities of Canadian readers make sense of the text and its cultural capital. We would suggest, however, that analytic work of this type is required in order to understand Canadians' engagement with "international" Canadian cultural artefacts, the processes of identification and disidentification that occur, and the role of Canadian media institutions and producers as mediators of *globally* successful commodities.

If we ask, "what cultural work does Canada Reads perform—and for whom?" then one straightforward answer is simply this: the program sells books. For the publishers of the selected titles there is a "Canada Reads" version of the "Oprah effect." In a country in which a bestselling novel moves 5,000 copies in a year, "Canada Reads 2002" saw both the winner, Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* (originally published in 1988 by McClelland & Stewart) and the runner-up, George Elliott Clarke's *Whylah Falls* (1990, Polestar Press) achieve staggering sales: approximately 90,000 and 10,000 respectively by the end of 2002. McClelland & Stewart also reported that sales of *The Handmaid's Tale* in March 2002 were up 544% over February, and again doubled in April over March; *The Stone Angel* was up 213%; and *A Fine Balance* 109% (Bethune 2003; Vartanian 2003b).<sup>11</sup>

Great news for the large publishing houses, but not so great for the remaining small presses who, in Joy Gugeler's words, "are cynical, exhausted, under-capitalised and lacking in resources" (2003). As we noted above, Jean Baird and Gugeler would like to see "Canada Reads" performing cultural work that is more explicitly cultural nationalist in tenor and protectionist in effect: introducing listeners to "new books," "celebrating a wider range of Canadian writers and publishers," and "creating a community of readers" for CanLit capable of sustaining the small-press industry—and yet, two of CBC's original goals for "Canada Reads" were couched in the same terms. Why then do some industry insiders feel that "Canada Reads" does not achieve the "right kind" of cultural work for CanLit? Situating Baird's and Gugeler's comments within the context of recent events in the Canadian publishing industry indicates why writers and publishers might feel anxious about the spectacle treatment of books that are already critically or commercially successful. "Canada Reads" was conceived in 2001, a year described by writer and critic Aritha Van Herk as "nothing less than an *annus horribilis*" for Canadian publishing (2003, 128). First, the pre-merger Chapters returned thousands of unsold books to publishers, creating severe cash-flow



problems; then, in April 2002, the month in which the first series of “Canada Reads” was broadcast, Stoddart, the owner of the largest Canadian book distribution company General Distribution Services, filed for bankruptcy, an event that pushed several small- and medium-sized presses to the brink of ruin (Van Herk 2003, 128-37; MacSkimming 2003, 379-83). An already undercapitalized cultural industry was in crisis. Given these circumstances, it is not surprising that writers and publishers should look to the CBC, maybe with nostalgia for the days when its links with their industry were closer because individuals such as Robert Weaver sat on editorial boards as well as in recording studios. While the innovative publications and high production values of small-press publishing in Canada deserve greater attention from the Canadian media, the ability of CBC Radio to renegotiate its relationship with what remains of the home-grown CanLit industry is constrained by the same problems of staff cutbacks and underfunding that inflect the content and audience outreach of “Canada Reads.”

### Canadians Read

Our analysis in this article has adopted a somewhat top-down approach because we have yet to conduct extensive qualitative work with readers; however, our observation of discussion boards, interviews, and our e-mail correspondence with selected readers enables us to offer some commentary from the standpoint of participants. As we have suggested, the CBC has tremendous cultural capital, but is often constrained by its traditions, organizational structures, and institutional conservatism from encouraging the degree of interactivity with listeners that would create sites of cultural negotiation and critical debate. It needs to involve readers who currently feel alienated by the “esoteric choices” of “Canada Reads” titles. As one committed CBC listener and avid reader we spoke to put it: “I feel like a literary lout—I cannot read these books!” (Fawcett 2003).

Dialogue about and responses to the books featured on “Canada Reads” occur in other sites and media, not of all which are governed by the time constraints or institutional imperatives of the CBC series. “Canada Reads” has spawned various “spin-off” events, from celebrations of the titles in libraries across Canada, to events on local CBC radio stations. CBC Montreal’s *Radio Noon* broadcast on 9 May 2003 a two-hour live event from the Pointe Claire branch of Chapters bookstore that included specially commissioned performance pieces by artists inspired by the 2003 winner of “Canada Reads,” *Next Episode*, as well as a panel discussion of the book. Amongst the topics raised was the issue of what

is lost when reading a book in translation, a subject that had been touched upon in the "Canada Reads" broadcasts but was explored at greater length in this show, where guests included the book's translator Sheila Fischman, as well as two of the "Canada Reads" panellists, Denise Bombardier and Justin Trudeau.<sup>12</sup> In Saskatoon, also for the 2003 series, McNally Robinson booksellers was the site for an evening of readings from the "Canada Reads" books, performed by local actors and hosted by local radio personality Sheila Coles. "Calgary Reads" was a panel discussion held in 2003 that tackled questions of the media's power to tell us what to read, freedom of speech, and valuing local writers. Organizers reported that 100 people attended the event (May 2003). In several smaller town libraries such as the Orillia Public Library (Ontario) and the Selkirk and St Andrews Regional Library (Manitoba), "Canada Reads" groups have held their own discussions, not only about the books but also about "the selection of books and panel, and the discussion that took place on air" (Blanco 2003). Program director at Selkirk and St Andrews, Shelly Blanco, reported that 13 people, whom she described as "very enthusiastic readers," participated in the group, committing themselves to reading all of the five books and attending three meetings. Other "Canada Reads" library events have involved local writers reading (Cobourg, Ontario); listening to the radio program and discussing it (Port Hope, Ontario); and discussion about the winning titles (30 people in Chatham, Ontario, in 2003; Welland, Ontario in 2002).<sup>13</sup> Within these various spaces and discussions lies the potential for detailed readings of the selected texts and extended debate about the issues that they have raised for readers. We suspect that it is within these spin-off activities that the populist image of "Canada" promoted by the show is negotiated and reimagined.

A different type of reader-led response to "Canada Reads," one that is more in keeping with the "game" aspect of the series, is the Chesley Challenge orchestrated by Susan Fawcett, the treasurer of Friends of the Library in Chesley, Ontario. The Challenge encourages communities across Canada to compete with each other for the most citizens to read the winning title. Wolseley in Saskatchewan won in 2002, beating approximately 20 libraries that registered for the competition, most of which were located in small communities rather than urban centres. The willingness of libraries and readers to participate (by reading the book and registering that they have done so at their local library) depends not only on local Friends associations helping to advertise the Challenge, but also on the winning title. No additional groups registered on the website after the announcement of *Next Episode* and one group even pulled out in "subtle protest" at its selection declaring it "unreadable" (Fawcett 2003).

There are several interpretations of these different reader responses to "Canada Reads." First, many listeners clearly want to participate more interactively with the program and to have more opportunities to express their opinions and interpretations of books. Second, these responses are (healthy) signs that readers do not passively accept the book choices as "morally edifying" "must-reads" (to adapt Niedzwiecki's [2002] and Bethune's [2003] comments quoted at the beginning of our essay). Third, implicit in the rejection of particular titles is a contest over literary value between the "Canada Reads" producers and some listeners in terms of what constitutes a "good book." Fourth, the fact that some books are perceived by CBC listeners to be "difficult" reveals the mismatch that occurs when "old" CBC book programming values bleed into the newer media-spectacle format of "Canada Reads," in which "fun" and drama are given precedence over "serious" book discussion. Finally, and most crucially, readers are making use of the series in different ways and for different ends, some of which demonstrate a far from passive acceptance of the on-air content or the nation it imagines.

## Conclusion

The great success of "Canada Reads" lies in its creation of new readers and, through its "variety packs" reading model, its promotion of different ways of reading, interpreting, and using texts that are not dependent on the reader's familiarity with a narrowly defined set of aesthetics or a specialist literary vocabulary. Despite the problems of translation across media, the program's multi-platform presentation offers new opportunities for readers to experience books and share reading in a variety of ways. These practices accord with Kellner's account of technocapitalism as a formation that can offer spaces and opportunities within which counter-cultural activity and consumer resistance can occur (2003, 25). "Media spectacle" elements of the show's production highlight the "game" aspects of the show, its involvement with contemporary celebrity culture, and its function as "infotainment." By engaging with these cultural formations, "Canada Reads" runs the risk of being seen as a pale imitation of more spectacular commercial media enterprises; but popular formations attract listeners and viewers, and public broadcasting corporations should be using and reworking "fun" formats and genres to engage, involve, and provoke their audience.

We have demonstrated how "Canada Reads" performs a variety of forms of cultural work on behalf of different agencies. While it creates commercial benefits for some book publishers and writers, it neglects others. Ironically, at least

in terms of the CBC's notion of a Canadian nation delimited by political borders, it is the smaller, independently owned presses located in Canada that are ignored. These presses are more closely aligned with the CBC's own explicit project of protecting and promoting Canadian culture than are the foreign-owned, multinational media corporations that are primarily in the business of producing an endless list of "blockbusters." As we have argued, the CBC has become thoroughly imbricated in the structures of technocapitalism, with the result that an "infotainment" program like "Canada Reads" is always already compromised in terms of the nation-building work and national imagining that it explicitly sets out to perform. Even this constraint could be partially overcome through the creation of a permanent outreach unit dedicated to the establishment of creative partnerships between the CBC, community groups, schools, and the public library system. The clash between the "Canada" imagined through the show's on-air content and a more unsettling and divided community envisaged and experienced by reader-listeners and some of the panellists suggests that more "connection" needs to occur through interactive means, on-line, and on- and off-air.

Ideologically speaking, then, the cultural impact of "Canada Reads" is muted by the underfunding of the CBC and a mandate fashioned during one moment of technological advance that is beginning to appear hopelessly idealistic and over-ambitious in an age of media convergence. Confusion about who the program is for—in terms of intended, perceived, and actual audience—strikes at the very heart of CBC Radio's role as a national public broadcaster charged with taking Canadian culture (amongst other matters) seriously on behalf of all Canadians. The successful aspects of "Canada Reads" that we have analyzed testify to the dedication, hard work, and creativity of its producers. The program's failures foreground the obstacles faced by a CBC struggling to orient itself in an era of corporate and technological convergence when its community is not so easy to imagine, "connect"—or please—as it used to be. The different epistemological models aired on "Canada Reads" illustrate a more accessible and egalitarian notion of "education" than the corporation's default rhetoric about its public service mandate suggests. The CBC requires a more radical reform of its ideological imperatives than has yet taken place. What, *does* it mean to "educate," "connect," and "inform" members of a nation-state in an era when the public sphere has shrunk, the market is king, and "national" literature is produced by global corporate players? That is the problematic that "Canada Reads" enacts, and it is a problematic with which the CBC, Canadian taxpayers, and their government must come to terms.

## Notes

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1. The concept of ruling relations of power comes from feminist standpoint theory developed by Canadian sociologist Dorothy E. Smith (see particularly *The Everyday World as Problematic* [1987] and *Texts* [1990]). Ruling relations of power include the political, legal, economic, and institutional structures that organize society. See also Danielle Fuller, *Writing the Everyday* (2004, 16-27) and Lynette Hunter, *Critiques of Knowing* (1999).
2. Some of the radio broadcasts for “Canada Reads” are archived at the “Canada Reads” website at [www.cbc.ca/canadareads](http://www.cbc.ca/canadareads).
3. See also James Davis (1961), Ann Firor Scott (1991), Kate Flint (1993), Elizabeth Long (1992), DeNel Rehberg Solo (2005), and Ann Ruggles Gere (1997).
4. See the Beyond the Book Project at [www.beyondthebookproject.org](http://www.beyondthebookproject.org).
5. See, for example, the American projects listed at the Library of Congress website, <http://www.loc.gov/loc/cfbook/one-book.html>, and the American Booksellers Association, <http://news.bookweb.org/news/305.html>.

For Canadian examples, see the One Book, One Vancouver project (Vancouver Public Library 2005), the One Book, One Community event in Kitchener-Waterloo (*Record* 2005), and the First Nation Communities Read program (Ontario Library Service 2005).

6. In years one and three (2002, 2004), the website for “Canada Reads” included the opportunity for readers to nominate their favourite book. In 2002 a list of 100 top choices appeared on the site, while in 2004 the list was limited to 25 titles. In 2003 the “People’s Choice” vote was limited to the five selected titles. Discussion boards were operational in 2003 and 2004, but a technical fault in May 2004 means that they are, unfortunately, no longer accessible. Commentary in this article is therefore based on notes taken when the discussions were still online at [www.cbc.ca/canadareads/](http://www.cbc.ca/canadareads/).
7. Rehberg Sedo’s research shows that while publishers’ reading guides work well for marketing titles, readers do not necessarily use them. They appropriate them for their own use, as, for example, guides to other resources such as websites, reference materials, movies, other books (2004).
8. Danielle Fuller is grateful to the discussions about the translation of Canadian fiction and the francophone readership of English-Canadian fiction with Lori Saint-Martin, writer, translator, and professor at Université de Montréal à Québec in May and July 2003.

9. *Richardson's Roundup* is a CBC Radio One program featuring stories from callers across the country that was previously hosted by librarian-trained author and radio personality Bill Richardson, who is the moderator of Canada Reads (2003-2005).
10. See, for example, the postings by Sophie Labelle (Montreal) 31 March 2004; Katherine Blouin (Quebec) 26 March 2004; Nathalie Thériage (Gatineau) 31 March 2004 ("Le Combat des livres" 2005).
11. Although Krys Ross, who was sales director at McClelland & Stewart in 2003, reported less dramatic increases in sales during "Canada Reads 2003," the second series of the show nevertheless resulted in a very large sales hike for publishers of selected titles (interview conducted in July 2003).
12. Other panellists included Patricia Smart. In the first hour, interviews were conducted by the show's host, Nancy Woods, and during the second hour, regular book club members Rebecca Million and Dave McGimpsey joined the discussion. Thanks to Rebecca Million for discussing the program.
13. Unless otherwise attributed, these examples were derived from a literature search for newspaper reports on "Canada Reads" and related activities conducted in July 2003.

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